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**THE LANGUAGE OF POETRY: A CASE STUDY OF WISE-SAYINGS, IDIOMS AND FIGURATIVE EXPRESSIONS IN NIYI OSUNDARE'S MIDLIFE**

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**Rotimi Jegede and Adaji Ameh**  
*Department of Languages*  
*Federal Polytechnic Idah, Kogi State*

**ABSTRACT**

One of the distinctive features of poetry is its economy and peculiarity of words. A poet has the ability to comment on several volumes of issues just in few words. Not only this, a good poem is a by-product of skill and craft. Since poetry is realized through language (spoken or written) understanding how poets coin expressions to achieve most times, rhythm, pregnant meanings "memorability" is *sine qua non* in appreciating poetic works. To this end, in this paper, Niyi Osundare's *Midlife* will be examined to further throw more light on certain aspect of poetic language and how it works.

**KEY WORDS:** Poetry, Language, Deviations, Wise-saying, Figures of speech, Idioms and Meanings.

**INTRODUCTION**

Language is very crucial to Literature without Language Literature cannot exist. Poetry is one genre of Literature which makes use of Language in a special way. As a result of the distinctiveness of poetry in terms of language-the term poetic language is recognized and accepted. Also, poets are said to have poetic licenses that give them the freedom to use language more often in an unconventional way. Some of the questions that could arise on account of this development are: why is the language of poetry peculiar? Why it is that neologism, idioms, figurative expressions, lexical-borrowings, collocations and figurative expressions are injected into poems? And why is it that lexical deviations are introduced in poetry? Is the language of poetry accessible? Some of the above questions are issues which we will attempt to examine in this paper.

**Language**

Since poetry, a genre of Literature, is a product of language, we will look at the phenomena, Language, briefly. Language is described by Encyclopedia Britannica as "the chief means of human communication". From the foregoing, the aim of language simply put, is to communicate. However, to achieve effective communication between the speaker (or writer) and hearer (or reader) what is communicated must be meaningful. As Gbenedio U. B. (1984:103) notes, "communication is not as important as the relevance to life of what is communicated". Encyclopedia Britannica, recognizes the fact that language cannot be separated from meaning by further describing language as consisting "...of vocal sounds to be represented graphically". M. A. K. Halliday (1973:5) equally contends, that "the potential of language is a meaning potential" which a literary artist could exploit. This fact is taken to consideration in the examination of the language of Midlife.

**The Language of Poetry**

One peculiar feature of poetry is that it often makes use of language in a way that defies conventional rules. The purpose of breaking the rules of language according to Mukarovsky (1970) is to foreground a given message. Halliday (1973:113) used the term

prominence to represent "the phenomenon of linguistic highlight whereby some features of a text stand out in some way". Other linguists equally have useful things to contribute to the understanding of the language of poetry. According to M. Roberts (1965), one of the functions of poetry is to explain the possibilities of language and use it to control and clarify, emotional, spiritual and senses experience(s). Graham (1968:22) also notes that poets "frequently place words in unusual contexts, especially by using them figuratively in order to realize as much meaning as possible" Leach (1967:8) also contributes to the view on language of poetry by stating that the poetic language may violate or deviate from the generally observed rules of the language in many different ways. This view draws the attention to the fact that language deviations are synonymous to poetry. D. H. Hymes (1971:278) also makes a contribution corroborating the above assertion. He opines that what matters in poetic foregrounding or conception aided by linguistic deviation is the idea that is being communicated, not the "grammaticalness" or "ungrammaticalness" of the expression in use. To him, the rules of grammar may be compromised when what it is in the front burner is communicative competence. Muriel Saville-Trocke (1982) identifies three essential components factor that enhance communication competence which are the linguistic knowledge, interaction skills and cultural knowledge.

In addition to the above, the context in which a word occurs equally determines the meaning inherent in it. Most words that are used connotatively could have their meanings realized through the situations, issues, meanings or ideas that engendered them. When the poetic expressions often considered as deviations are interpreted in the light of the context that produce them, it reduces the "strangeness" attached to them. Therefore, it is our hope that the explanations of some of the situations that produced some of the wise-sayings, and figurative expressions and traditional idioms in the text understudy, will help in understanding their meanings.

### **Midlife**

Midlife, Osundare's collection of poetry, is a poetic rendition of its author's birthday anniversary. The volume is a product of author's self-examination, probe and reflections on the state of affairs of his continent since his birth. Like he rightly suggests at the introit section of the volume by saying: "Taller too, able to look the giant in the face, able to ask Africa a few sundry questions about her dormant dawn". The text strives to access the levels of socio-political and economic developments in the post colonial continent of Africa. So, expectedly the volume is a poetic account of the poet's background, mission and pursuit as they help in strengthening his conviction and commitment to expose the societal-ills, economic collapse and poor administration in African continent

### **Analyses**

For the purpose of easy identification, we shall underline the instances of peculiar use of figurative expressions; wise-sayings and idioms in the randomly selected examples used for analyses.

In 'Rocksong' the first movement of the text, the poet delves into issues that have to do with his source, his origin, especially as they concern his traditional, cultural orientation and heritage. By affirmation, he says:

I am a caller at noon  
restless sphere of the universe of the sun

of galloping oceans and rock  
which bath their feet in misty water (M.L. 3)

Describing his source further, he gives a picturesque reference to his place of birth Ikere in Ekiti State, Nigeria as a town dotted by sacred and legendary rocks:

... child of the rock  
child of rock hills holding hands  
Above the tallest roofs ...  
whoever craves the blue legend of  
Ikere skies  
Let him turn his neck  
Like a barber's chair  
... for here the rock in yam. (M..L. 11)

The reason behind the expressions describing the rocks that "gallop" "bathe their feet," "holding hands" "providing yams" as if they are human beings in two examples above is to render in a memorable and exciting manner the information that the rocks of the poet's line are historical icons and monuments, sources of defence and provision for the poet and his people.

In the second movement of the collection "What the River Said", there is a metaphoric presentation of the river as an essence of creation. If the rocks in the previous movement are regarded as the origin of the poet's paternal ancestral lineage, the rivers are considered as his maternal ancestral source. Thus, through dexterous blend of metaphorical expressions and wise sayings; we can see the poet as a product of conjugal tryst between the dynamic ancient river and rock of his source. Confirming our assertion, he further has this to say:

Child of the rock, child of the River  
Child of the river which plies  
The word with his hidden legs (M. L. 7)

However, it is pertinent to note here, like we have inferred before that the language of poetry is such that does not ordinarily yield meaning like the ordinary day-to-day language. The beauty and strength of poetic expression lies in the fact that it provokes reasoning and thinking, it opens wide, meaning possibilities and interpretations. In the above, the fact that a river could possess "hidden legs" could be at first strange but at the level of connotative interpretation, we would agree that the idea of the water being found everywhere under the sun suggests that there might be millions of "hidden legs" that carry it all over the world. However, the thematic significance here is the fact that the poet sees his message as a universal one, meant for the emancipation of all the poor people of the world.

Still establishing his universal visions as humanist and poet, he asserts:

I am a running river  
sundering land, coupling nations ...  
coiling like a patient cobra  
Round the foot of travelling hill (M. L. 23)

The idea of the river flowing from place to place, sometimes joining the body of water of other continents and its similarity with flow of humanity is what the poet tries to capture in the phrases "running river" "sundering land", and "coupling nations". Here, the poet again, achieves through the use of metaphorical illustration a unique picture of a "borderless humanity" in which the poet, like any other person, is a member.

"Human in Every Sense", the third movement of the collection asserts the poet's individuality and some of those things he stands for. The movement reveals Osundare as a socialist and human rights advocate, he says:

I am the forest of the desert  
I am the wind which sculpts  
The sand into magnificent patterns. (M. L. 35)

The expression "forest of the desert" clarifies his position as an incurable optimist, who sees hope in deplorable situation. Perhaps, if he had stated in the above that he is just a hopeful individual without colouring it in the figurative manner, the freshness and soundness associated with the poetic line would have been lost.

Going further, elaborating on his humanistic engagement and commitment to poetry, the poet declares:

I am earth's twilight yawn  
and also her vigilant dawn. (M. L. 37)

The question that comes to mind here is, first, does the earth yawn, and what makes the earth vigilant, is the earth a human being, and what makes the poet to be the "yawn" and "dawn" of the earth? As these questions tickle our imagination, a clear picture emerges that the poet by the amplified description of intimacy between the two entities – the earth and the poet, he is trying to foreground the bond, that makes the latter the voice of the former.

Still in same poem, identifying and empathizing with the masses and their travails, the poet declares:

I am the peasant in whose  
Palms the machete forgets its handle. (M. L. 42)

How will a machete, an inanimate object, gets involved in the act of forgetting? And while will the object leaves its handle in the hand of the poet? These are possible interrogations that the wise-saying in above expression pose. But without going too far, at the level of connotative interpretation, we understand that the poet, by such expression, is trying to portray the saddening fate of millions of poor and exploited people whose lives are synonymous with profitless hard work.

The bedrock of Osundare's deviational experimentation with expressions does not find pillars of support in figurative use of language and wise-saying alone, it draws a huge body of support from traditional idioms and allusion as he has earlier confirmed at the introductory note to the text Midlife himself. He says: "This volume, is informed by inescapably panoramic vision where voices are many ... in keeping with oral poetic

tradition whose life spring I am for ever indebted. to." keeping faith with the use of traditional idioms and waxing philosophically about the importance of awareness in a world filled with deceit and manipulation especially the deception that keeps the ruled under the oppression of the ruler, the poet counsels in the following idiomatic expressions that the victims of such deception, the masses, must be watchful and extra ordinarily sensitive to avoid the Greek gifts of the ruling class:

I am friend of the eye which looks  
and sees ...  
The knowing mind is the eye of the  
body. (M. L. 40)

The traditional idiom(s) of "friend of the eye" and "the knowing mind" are cleverly and artistically introduced in his counsel, to hammer into the consciousness of his audience, the fact that they have to be aware of the socio-political developments of their environments all the time, to avoid being deceived by dishonest leaders.

In continuation of his advice for the masses to shun ignorance and embrace awareness the poet says further in the same poem:

See with your body,  
... ponder the stab behind the smile  
see with your body  
the noise of every silence.  
The silence of every noise. (M. L. 52)

At the level of denotative application, how correct are the expressions: "see with your body" "the stab behind the simile" "the noise of every silence" we may want to ask. Definitely, denotatively speaking, the expressions appear meaningless and grammatically incomprehensible. However, these traditional idioms at the level of connotative interpretation are a mere piece of advice on the need to see beyond the surface and the ordinary.

In an open reference of disdain for some of the African leaders whom he considers as misfits, the poet has this to say:

Of heads which wear the shoes  
Of feet which don/their caps. (M. L. 102)

Under normal circumstance, the proper place for a cap is the head, while the appropriate place for shoes are the feet. However, in an abnormal situation this may not be so. So what seems an ordinary twist of expression in the above is an idiom employed as a deviational device to foreground the level of chaos and disorderliness found in most African countries where the unfit rig or force their ways to leadership positions.

Concluding his long song of birthday reflections, Osundare in Midlife, reiterates the modest efforts he has made in furthering the cause of the poor.

I have left toe prints  
In the laughter of fragrant dust  
I have hawked steaming song  
In the streets of hungry ears

Broken the emperor's sword at  
its gilded hilt. (M. L. 108)

"The fragrant dust" and "hungry ears" figuratively stand for the masses, while the "steaming songs" represent the passionate manner to which he has put his poetry to the service of the poor by talking about their plights and by, envisioning a better world for them.

## **CONCLUSION**

All said, we have been able to comment on the peculiarity of language of poetry, the use to which figurative expressions, wise-sayings and traditional idioms could be put in foregrounding thematic messages and at the same time making them accessible. Going by our analytical discourse of Midlife we have suggested that through the use of unconventional expressions poets though known to economize words, can at the same time, expand the frontiers of meanings.

Lastly, we have attempted, by our comments in this paper that crisp, unique use and wise choice of words are all part of what that makes the language of poetry exciting, apt, peculiar and at the same time meaningful.

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